

# Dateline: Accra

Posted by: **stephenzook** | August 4, 2009

## Witch exorcisms and treacherous cultural boundaries

(Video footage is at the end of the post. An earlier mistake on my part is now corrected. The video should be public.)

Trying to convey cultural differences accurately can be treacherous when a reporter goes from one section of a city to another. Going halfway around the world, then, can create ethical minefields for a reporter.



Such is the case with this post. One of my fellow students, Laura Steiner, is writing about witchcraft. By chance, she connected with a well-known herbalist in Accra, Wofa Kissi, who sells herbal creams, counsels patients, and most perhaps most surprising, deals with witches and spirits. Kissi invited the student to a ceremony where he and his assistants would cure people of curses and attempt to expel spirits from the afflicted, and he told her to bring friends if she wanted.

So, I got invited to a witch exorcism. Follow the jump for more, including video footage.

The ceremony was one of the most confusing things I've seen. Not because it was hard to tell what was happening (although it wasn't too easy, since most of the ceremony was in Twi, a widely-spoken regional language), but because the ceremony didn't fit into any of the cultural memes or stories I grew up with.

First, the concept of witches. When I think of witches, I think of Halloween costumes, persecution in Salem and Wiccans. I certainly don't think of a very real entity with the agency to travel, speak and harm. But that is how many Ghanaians view witches, and that belief was visible at the ceremony.

According to tradition, each extended family (which can include hundreds of family members) has a witch. These witches can attack other people's souls in their sleep, possibly killing the person.

Kissi told us dreams can be symptoms of being cursed by a spirit: dreaming of having an affair or harming other people can mean a spirit is afflicting you.

"Witches are a way to explain the unexplainable. Why did this person die, why can't I have babies? There are scientific explanations, but spirits are a way to explain why something happens to one person and not another," Laura told me.

Ghanaians of most walks of life retain many of these beliefs, whether they are Christian, Muslim or otherwise. In fact, the ceremony, though it has its roots in traditional Ghanaian religion, included call-and-response shouts of "Amen!"

Also of relevance, I met a Ghanaian at the ceremony who is considerably more well-traveled than I am, even within the United States. When Laura and I visited him later, she asked him if he believed in the spirits. He replied emphatically that he did.



The second aspect of the ceremony that was hard to understand was the combination of solemnity and nonchalance. At one point during the ceremony, I saw one man praying fervently, head bowed, while the man next to him yawned. This contrast continued throughout the ceremony. Sometimes the crowd, along with Kissi and his assistants, would break out in laughter in response to what an afflicted person would say. At the same time, everyone seemed to accept that this was a necessary thing to do. I didn't sense that Kissi was trying to convince the people the spirits were indeed real, or that he even needed to.

The actual ceremony started late. We got to Kissi's home, where he has a pavilion in which some ceremonies are held, around 9 p.m. Around 11:30, the crowd of about 60 loaded buses and several vehicles, and drove to a beach, not far from the popular Bojo Beach. There, a generator was set up, powering lights and speakers. The ceremony lasted until about 3:30 a.m.

Everyone, including my friends and I, stood in a large circle in the sand. Kissi and his assistants led prayers and songs, and then he went around, holding people's hands and putting his hand on their foreheads. Some would simply return to the circle, others would begin stumbling and shaking. Those who did the latter would be tended to the assistants, who tried to coax out the spirit afflicting the person. Once this was accomplished, they talked to the person, asking what the spirit wanted.

Eventually, the person was led out of the circle and down closer to the sea, where they tossed a bottle of Schnapps (given to them earlier) into the surf. According to Kissi, this was to get the spirit to return to the sea, where most of them reside.

(A note here about Schnapps. It is something of a tradition here in Ghana. I am told that buying land in rural areas usually involves visiting the local chief and bringing a bottle of Schnapps and an appropriate sum of money.)

After tossing the bottle into the sea, the afflicted returned to the circle, standing quite casually with the others.

I suppose I'm taking such care to explain the feel and mood of the ceremony because I'm a little anxious about how to portray it. When I was there, I didn't get the sense that there was any scam being pulled, or that there was anything manipulative or abusive about it. Both men and women were afflicted, and those who were weren't treated differently. If anything, it seemed healing.

During a group interview our group had with the Minister of Information of Ghana, Laura asked about witchcraft. The minister replied that some of the exorcism practices are abusive, and if reported, those who carry them out are prosecuted. The truth is, the ceremony we attended was no more intense than an evangelical church service in the United States, and perhaps less so, psychologically.

Who knows. I don't believe in spirits, but maybe there is something therapeutic about being surrounded by people who care about you while you get to exorcise a little frustration and anger. It makes sense, in a way. I know I want to kick and scream on occasion.

With that admittedly limited explanation and caveat, here is some video footage of the ceremony.

## Witch exorcism: healing through tradition



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Practices such as these are not only offensive to actual Witches, they are wholly based on rabid superstition and fear of the unknown.

Throughout Africa the stereotypical portrayal of a Witch is far more sinister and in many respects echoes that of European agitators responsible for engendering Witch-hunts in Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries.

Centuries of both European and African scholars have added to and constructed this false notion of what a Witch is.

Historically anthropologists and Christian theologians incorrectly labelled traditional African religions in which ritual magic was employed, as 'Witchcraft'.

So-called 'African Witchcraft' is largely a fabricated construct in which all traditional African religious and magical practices have been indiscriminately lumped together.

Those who practice these religions and magical traditions on the African continent however certainly do not identify as Witches and do not identify their traditional African religious practices as Witchcraft.

Misconceptions surrounding Witchcraft are largely informed through ignorance of what Witchcraft actually is. Many non-Witches, whether African traditionalists or Christians, claim to know more about Witchcraft than Witches themselves. This leads me to conclude that what they think they know is based in large measure on their absolute ignorance.

By: **Damon Leff** on August 5, 2009  
at 4:14 am

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